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SYNDICATES

A man who digs up what's covered up

Jack Anderson discusses the Iran/contra scandal and his 40 years working on the UFS 'Washington Merry-Go-Round' column

By Tricia Drevets

The *Washington Post* has called him "America's ombudsman."

Newsweek has described him as an "old-fashioned muckraking journalist."

And officials from the CIA to the White House have desperately wanted to know his sources at one time or another.

He is Jack Anderson, who is considered by many to be the nation's premier investigative reporter.

"I've never really tried to define what I do," Anderson said during a break in his morning writing schedule from his home office in Bethesda, Md. "I've always tried to dig up what the government has tried to cover up. I've always felt that this was what the Founding Fathers intended for the press to do. The press should represent the *governed* and not the *governors*."

Anderson said his views on journalism were compatible with those of the late Drew Pearson, the Washington, D.C., columnist for whom he worked for 22 years.

Anderson was Pearson's handpicked choice to take over his column after his death in 1969. Anderson has continued what he calls Pearson's "crusading spirit" since then — and has infused it with some crusading of his own.

Today, the daily "Washington Merry-Go-Round" — which, at 55 years old, may be the oldest syndicated newspaper column — is distributed to over 850 papers by **United Feature Syndicate**. In addition, another column is prepared every week for weekly clients.

A newspaper career is something Anderson said he "just sort of fell into." It started when his Boy Scout troop selected him to be its reporter to the local *Deseret News* in Anderson's native Utah.

"I became editor of the Boy Scout page at the age of 12," Anderson recalled. "And then, in the summer-time, I was hired by the *Murray Eagle* [in the suburbs of Salt Lake City] as a reporter. I got $7 a week."

Jack Anderson

By the age of 18, Anderson was working at the *Salt Lake City Tribune* as a city desk reporter.

Anderson noted that he hadn't heard of Drew Pearson until he was a civilian war correspondent during World War II. "I remember I was in the press hostel in Chung king, China, and everyone was talking about their postwar plans," he said. "When they finally got around to asking me what I wanted to do, I remember saying that the news capital of the world is Washington, D.C., and that was where I wanted to be.

"Somebody told me I ought to work for Drew Pearson. I asked some questions and was told that he knew the back alleys and back rooms of Washington."

Later, while in the Army, Anderson was assigned to the Shanghai office of *Stars & Stripes*, but he never forgot that conversation in Chungking.

"I was always the kind of reporter who wanted to find out what the others had missed," Anderson pointed out. "During World War II, everyone in China was writing about the front lines. I was able to operate behind the lines with the Chinese guerrillas, who no one was writing about. I always wanted to be where no other reporters were.

"I hadn't defined all of this at the time, but I know now that I was formulating what I wanted to do . . . something new, something exclusive."

In 1947, at the age of 24, Anderson turned up at Drew Pearson's office in Washington and applied for a job. As Pearson's right-hand reporter, Anderson found his niche.

"I immediately got into investigative reporting; I think because he [Pearson] didn't know what to do with me," Anderson said with a chuckle. Some of his early stories involved an expose of a Mobile, Ala., businessman who had defrauded the PX (post exchange) system and had used political influence to cover it up as well as a piece on an FCC commissioner in Ohio who had the equivalent of a Ku Klux Klan background.

It didn't take long for Anderson to realize the power of Pearson's column. The Mobile businessman, for example, committed suicide after Anderson's evidence came out in print. "That was very traumatic for me," he stated quietly.

"Washington Merry-Go-Round" operates very much like a newspaper, according to Anderson. Joseph Spear, who joined Anderson in 1969, has served as editor and chief of staff for about 10 years.

"When I was functioning as editor, I realized it was not an efficient use of my time," Anderson explained. "I have some excellent contacts in Washington, and having Joe as editor frees me to report."

About a dozen reporters are on the staff, with seven working on a full-time basis. Anderson shares the column's byline alternately with Spear and his top reporter Dale Van Atta.

"I always intended to share the byline," Anderson noted. "Just as Drew passed on the column to me, I should pass it on to someone . . . . Dale will eventually inherit the column."

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Anderson is quick to point out that he has no plans to retire. "The main reason [for sharing the byline] is to

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give recognition to two fine reporters," he said.

Van Atta, who joined the staff in 1979, has been nominated for the Pulitzer Prize five times. Anderson won the Pulitzer in 1972.

Earlier this year, Anderson and Van Atta received Sigma Delta Chi's prestigious "Service to Journalism" award for their role in breaking the Iran/contra scandal story in "Washington Merry-Go-Round." With a series of columns beginning on April 28, 1986, the journalists reported that the White House was involved in "behind-the-scenes negotiations with Iran over the American hostages held by pro-Iranian terrorists."

Although they broke the story in April 1986, Van Atta and Anderson initially got wind of the scandal some six months earlier. Through confidential sources in the intelligence community, they first heard what Anderson called "whisperings" rather than solid evidence of an arms-for-hostages deal.

"On November 17, 1985, Dale and I called on [Robert] 'Bud' McFarlane," said Anderson. "It was the eve before he left for the Geneva Convention, and he flatly denied everything."

Van Atta continued to work on the story and, in early December, he received an anonymous phone call from a woman who said an arms-for-hostages deal was being worked out at that moment. "We usually don't pay much attention to anonymous calls," Anderson said. "But Dale thought he recognized this woman's voice."

In mid-December 1985, Van Atta visited Noel Koch, then the deputy assistant secretary of defense for international affairs. Koch told the reporter that he was asking some dangerous questions and further added that the American hostages might be killed if a story came out on the dealings with Iran (see sidebar).

"We decided to hold the story," Anderson said. As it turned out, Anderson and Van Atta sat on the Iran story for five months more — five months that included veiled threats from White House personnel and a plea from President Reagan himself, in a personal interview with Van Atta, not to run the story.

While Anderson and Van Atta held the arms-for-hostages story, they did run a series of columns on terrorism. "At the same time Reagan was dealing with the worst of all terrorists — Khomeini — he was making statements denouncing terrorists," Anderson said. "The White House was leaking stories about Kaddafi and the newspapers were buying it. We decided to go with a story that we hoped would not risk anyone's life. We wrote that it wasn't Kaddafi but Khomeini that we should be writing about."

Anderson said he feels Reagan got into a disinformation campaign. "When the President ordered the attack on Kaddafi, I thought he was going too far," declared the columnist. "That's when we broke the story . . . . We felt the White House was running an elaborate smoke screen for the arms-for-hostages deal . . . portraying Muammar Kaddafi as the master terrorist when, at the same time, it was selling arms to the real master terrorist."

After the initial columns about the scandal appeared, Anderson and Van Atta received phone calls from most major newspapers. "They all said they couldn't confirm it [the story]," Anderson said. "These people were all lying to the press. The interesting thing is, though, that the President never lied to us."

Today, Anderson has the advantage of hindsight to wonder if he did the right thing in holding the story so long.

"It's not clear, but I think if we had broken the story in December [1985], we might have spared the U.S. a lot of embarrassment. We might have broken up the whole plot. By the time we did write about it, it had already achieved momentum."

If he had to make the same decision over again, however, Anderson said he probably would still decide to hold the story. "We were very concerned about the hostages' welfare," he said. "I'll do a lot of things for a scoop, but not risk someone's life — particularly when told by a high-level Pentagon official that that's what we would have done."

Anderson has had a unique perspective from which to view the media coverage of the Iran/contra scandal as it has unfolded. "The press has to jump on a story like ours in a cooperative act of perception," he said. "If fellow reporters don't jump in and widen the beachhead, then it's not going to become a major scandal.

"I don't think the press did this until the pro-Iranian magazine in Beirut broke their story that said 'Bud' McFarlane had been there in Beirut . . . . That visit, which was the type of thing that could be easily checked, is the reason the press was able to flush this thing out."

Anderson summarized the whole scandal by describing Reagan as a "president who spoke in generalities about what he wanted done" and Lt. Col. Oliver North and late CIA director William Casey as "two Rambo types who dealt in their own set of specifics."

The Iran story is just one in a long line of controversial exposés in which Anderson has been involved.

He described a series of columns he wrote about the CIA hiring Mafia members to kill Fidel Castro in the early 1960s as "one hell of a story." Anderson observed: "Here I was dealing with two of the most close-mouthed organizations in the world."

The columnist said he played his "hairiest game" with the government during the Watergate investigations when he was able to obtain copies of the grand jury transcripts. "At this time Nixon was stonewalling, refusing to let his people testify under executive privilege," Anderson explained.

Anderson began publishing excerpts from the transcripts, and before long he was threatened with prison if he did not reveal his sources.

It was a major coup for Anderson, and the press in general, when Judge John Sirica settled on asking Anderson to return the tapes. "Of course I had transcribed everything I had wanted anyway, so it was a great concession to just have to return the tapes," recalled Anderson, who added: "Those were exciting days."

Today, Anderson has a tight schedule that usually includes 12-hour workdays and many speaking engagements around the country. Amazingly, the columnist takes no salary from "Washington Merry-Go-Round," his radio broadcasts, or book sales.

"I've always thought of the column as a public service," Anderson explained, adding that the profits go to support the column and his staff. "By relying on my lectures for my daily bread, I force myself to get out in the country and meet people." He said he usually speaks about once a week.

Other current projects include his work on a new novel called *Control*, which is about attempts by foreigners to take over the American media, and a sequel to *Confessions of a Muckraker*, which he is writing with author James Boyd.

"I've always had a hard work schedule," Anderson acknowledged. "I don't take many vacations, but I've always felt that people who take vacations need a change of pace. With my work and my travels, I have a constant breakup of my routine. I just don't need a change of pace."